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A CENTURY OF SALONS AND ACADEMIES.

BY ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL.

NEVER, since the world began, has there been so much self-conscious talk about art as during the last hundred years, never such an enormous effort to develop it, such a deliberate determination to patronize it. In France, from the moment the Revolution did away with the old restrictions of the *Académie*, until the establishment of a second *Salon* in our own day, it has been one long story of agitation and development, of secession and revolt,—of Romanticists pitted against Classicists, of Impressionism struggling against Naturalism, of the rise and fall of more *isms* and *ists* than one can count. In England, by 1800, the Academy, founded by artists after the French model and approved by Royalty, was already flourishing; by the middle of the century, the enthusiasm had reached such a pitch that the gigantic forcing-house for the manufacture of more artists was started at South Kensington; and, after that, there is no keeping pace with the Schools, Societies, Classes, Missions, Extension Lectures, East End Exhibitions set going, in order to bring art to the people, with, loud above the turmoil of the self-appointed teachers and preachers, the voice of Mr. Ruskin, the Prophet, proclaiming the new Gospel.

It is interesting, therefore, now we have come to the last shows of the century, where, if anywhere, the results of the agitation and enthusiasm should be seen, to stop and ask just how much art has profited by modern patronage and protection, and what has been done for the artist. Next summer, the Paris Exhibition may round out the century more perfectly; but there, after all, it will be easier to enjoy the great things accomplished during recent years, than to judge of the true state of affairs at

the present moment. That is why it seems to me that the *Salons* and Academy of this season have a special importance, apart from any question of the merit of individual work.

If there is one point upon which people whose opinion is of value agree, it is that these shows are of unparalleled dulness. The dulness has been gradually growing, to be sure; artists have not leaped into it at a bound. But it seems to have culminated this spring, as if in honor of the close of a century that has gloried, rather ostentatiously, in its love for art. In Paris, they will tell you, it is because everybody is holding back to make the finer display in 1900. In London, they drag out again the old plea of a winter of fog and influenza. But, at least, there is no doubt in anybody's mind of the dulness, while the more enterprising are busy seeking for an excuse to explain it away.

No such excuse is needed at the Royal Academy. That it should get together a distinguished collection in its annual show, is the last thing that has been expected of it since the days of Reynolds and Gainsborough. The whole Academical system is against such a possibility. Good work has at times been seen on its walls, the promising performances of the younger men sometimes discovered stowed away in odd corners. Is it not still recorded as an astounding fact that Mr. Whistler's "Portrait of His Mother" once graced the exhibition, that for the "Christ Washing Peter's Feet," of Ford Madox Brown, a bad place was grudgingly found, that room was made for the earlier canvases of the Pre-Raphaelites? Indeed, good work may still be buried in the year's accumulation of rubbish, but I do not believe in hunting for art in a picture gallery, as if it were a needle in a haystack. When you read a book, you are not supposed to wade through hundreds of pages of advertisements before you come to that which can be called literature; at a concert, you do not sit and listen to a medley of music-hall songs as a preparation for Wagner.

The New Gallery, on the other hand, inherited the traditions of the Grosvenor as the headquarters of the independents, as a refuge from the Academy; and, consequently, one had a right to ask for better things from it. As long as Sir Edward Burne-Jones lived, his work was the Gallery's most conspicuous feature; and, with its richness of invention, the poetry of its symbolism, it commanded respect, even if one was not in sympathy with the painter's methods. But now, this year, what is there?

I do not exaggerate, I am expressing not only my own views, but those of the three or four London critics whose criticism carries weight, when I say that, beyond a group of portraits by Mr. Sargent and Mr. Orchardson, and a little landscape by Mr. Mark Fisher, there is nothing in either show, absolutely nothing, of genuine distinction. And yet there are some three thousand other contributions: among them, a few pictures that might be described in a detailed notice for a local paper; pictures that mark the progress or degeneracy of the painter, or are noteworthy for some other reason of the kind, but are without the merit that alone would justify a description of them being sent across the Atlantic, or, for that matter, across the Channel. A vague attempt to revive eighteenth century affectations or to play the primitive, a feeble effort to copy the success of the Academy last year, or the sensation of the *Salon* the year before, and the artist is at the end of his resources. He cannot see for himself, he has not the energy to study the work of men who can. When it comes to Mr. Sargent, his portraits, though so much better than the poor stuff surrounding them, scarcely equal his own most brilliant achievements. At the New Gallery, his "Colonel Ian Hamilton," a fine spirited presentment of the finest type of soldier, is a sketch, not a finished portrait; at the Royal Academy, his "Lady Faudel-Phillips," the most striking of the several there, is one of his audaciously clever pieces of characterization, amusing in its pitiless realism, amazing in its renderings of jewels and all the details of a gorgeous costume; but it does not compare with the "Mr. Wertheimer" of last year, and I very much question if, in a show of all of Mr. Sargent's portraits, one would pick out either of these two for special mention or eulogy.

However, it is not only in the absence of individual work of note that the two exhibitions are so depressing. It is rather in their lifelessness, their colorlessness as a whole. They carry on no good traditions; they reveal no tendencies, new or old; they represent no school, no movement, no group; they announce no revolution, no new departure. That too many artists to-day can only demolish and not create, that they have become the politicians of art, is, I know, felt to be a serious fault in them. But, if the painters and sculptors at the Academy would only show the slightest desire to demolish anything, if they would only give us something as definite as politics, it would be far more hopeful, far

more entertaining, far more stimulating, than their present content to hold what one critic defines as "a bazaar for the sale of bad art and the encouragement of bad artists."

As for the New Gallery, with the death of Burne-Jones it has simply lost every reason for its existence. It has dwindled into a mere annex of the Academy, another stall in the yearly bazaar, that is all. The truth is that the chief movement the Grosvenor countenanced and supported was but the fashion of a day. A revival as entirely artificial as the Neo-Gothic could not last longer. A much more honest revolt against the Academy and its conventions was that of the younger men, of some fifteen years ago, who founded the New English Art Club. But they, as "the younger men" always will do, flew to extremes; they were too narrow in their exclusiveness; they gave too free play to their prejudices, with the result that, though their exhibitions are still pleasant, still distinctly artistic in intention—which is more than can be said of most of the other shows—they themselves have lost the little influence that was once theirs.

Whatever hope there is at the present moment, whatever promise, whatever vitality, centres in the International Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Gravers, now in its second year. The name explains that it does not confine itself to British art and artists. But, unlike the Academy—which does occasionally encourage the foreigner, to the great indignation of the native—the International accepts only the best, the most vigorous, the most distinguished expression of foreign art. It prefers Mathew or James Maris to Alma-Tadema, as a Dutchman; Besnard to Bouguereau, as a Frenchman. And when it is remembered that it can claim Mr. Whistler as its president; that it is the only London gallery open to the Glasgow men, who, if they have their defects, have also the qualities of those defects; that it is not hedged about by privileges for the few, restrictions for the many; that the poor or indifferent work which creeps in fails from too much rather than too little ambition; that its galleries are arranged with some feeling for effect, unity of purpose, and consideration for every separate picture, and not solely in the vain desire to crowd in as many things as they can hold; it will be understood why, upon the International, the future of art in England, or I should say, Great Britain, seems to rest.

And now, to turn to Paris. The *Salons* also are dull, and one

feels it the more keenly because, again this year, both are sheltered under the vast roof of the *Palais des Machines*. Dulness is no new thing at the "Champs-Élysées" *Salon*, as it is still familiarly known; that is, the show of the older *Société des Artistes Français*. Since the secession of its most accomplished members, after the split of 1889, it has been virtually as dreary as the Royal Academy. It is larger; there is a higher level of technical ability in the work—in Paris, at least, as has been said, "they know which end of the brush to put in their mouth, though in London it is still a matter of taste;" and more courage and enterprise are displayed in the size of the canvases. I can find no other difference, and I sometimes think that the *Salon* is drearier than the English exhibition, simply because it is so immense, and because the artists are well enough trained to know better. I wandered through the wilderness of galleries this year, I passed the usual acres of canvases and tons of stone, and the only pictures I saw—the only pictures I have seen in these last ten dreary years, until I am tired of saying so—were the gray moorlands of M. Pointelin, the stately riverside landscapes by M. Harpignies, the idyls by M. Fantin-Latour. I am not speaking of the sound work, of the meritorious work, of the promising work, of the work that is found by searching for it, catalogue in hand; but of the work with just that little more in it that tells in a huge modern exhibition, where even the sensation of heroic proportions has ceased to thrill or astonish. M. Rochegrosse may vie with M. Tattegrain in the number of square yards he can cover with his brush and in the horrors with which he can fill his big *Salon machine*, but the year's *reclame* is all for the statue of Balzac by M. Falguière. Not because of any charm, or distinction, or beauty in the bulky, shapeless, commonplace figure, but altogether because of last year's gossip over M. Rodin's melodramatic "Balzac," and the refusal of the *Société des Gens de Lettres* to accept it, and their choice of M. Falguière to design another more to their taste, and M. Falguière's noble but disappointed hope that two masterpieces would be the result. Where there is such splendid copy for the journalist, who cares if there be scant glory for the artist? The incident is typical; that is why I have referred to it.

The *Salon* of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*, the "Champ-de-Mars" *Salon*, is, as it always has been from the start, gayer, more amusing, more adventurous. But to anyone who has

followed its career, who has been to its every exhibition since the first, as I have, the gaiety now seems a trifle forced, the adventure half-hearted, the actual accomplishment, of which there is much, but a repetition, a re-echo, of what has already been done, and better done, by the same artists in previous shows. On every side are signs of lassitude and fatigue. There is no one to take the place of Puvis de Chavannes; his death occurred at the very crisis when the exhibition could least afford to lose those calm, stately, low-toned decorations, that, in their reticence and sobriety, filled one with a sense of repose after the loud restlessness, the hot, strident color of the mere clever experiment, the picture painted frankly to tell—to scream—on exhibition walls.

Time, or over-production, seems to have destroyed, or lessened, the vigor and vitality of this society's other leaders. M. Carrière is so overwhelmed by the tragedy of life that he no longer sees its beauty. Weariness has taken possession of M. Aman-Jean: his was never a robust talent, but now you can almost fancy the brush slipping from his fingers, in his sheer physical prostration, as he labored to be in time for the *Salon*. M. Gaudara is oppressed by the millinery of his sitters, M. Blanche by the elegance of his composition. Were I writing a description of the work, I should have something to say in praise of M. Besnard's ceiling, in doubt of M. Boutet-de-Mouvel's decoration; I might speak in detail of the studies and landscapes by M. Cazin, and, here and there, of another suggestive or interesting canvas. But, as my object now is to give an idea of the character of the collection as a whole, I cannot but dwell on this effect of general fatigue, which struck me above all else. Several artists, among them, unfortunately, Mr. Whistler, who can ill be spared, absent themselves altogether. The American section—Mr. Sargent and Mr. Dannat unrepresented, Mr. Alexander and Mr. McLure Hamilton sending only one or two portraits,—would be surprisingly weak were it not for Mr. St. Gaudens. His "General Sherman" and M. Rodin's "Eve" are the triumphs of the year.

And, as at the Royal Academy, it is not only in individual performances that this distressing inertia declares itself. In vain I looked for the activity—not the most desirable characteristic, perhaps, but still better than indifference—that expresses itself in new movements, in new schools, in new departures. For long at this *Salon*, one was sure to come upon a little group of painters

who were struggling with new problems of light or atmosphere, or boldly trying new experiments in technique, and whose work, if in a measure but a bid for notoriety, had, undeniably, life in it. There is nothing of the kind now. Nor any indication of the talent, that, however strange or bewildering or bizarre it may at first seem, one knows must in the end vindicate itself—prove itself right. And this is not, as in the near past, because subject has become all-absorbing. The wave of mysticism has passed; the religious picture is no more, and M. Carolus-Duran, in his dingy “Crucifixion,” only succeeds in sealing its fate. All the energy and vigor that survive, I thought, was to be found in the prints and drawings, though in them also, compared to the delightful collections of recent years, there is a sad falling off.

Here, then, at the close of the century, we have, in the two great art centres of Europe, the large exhibitions of the season justly, as well as universally, admitted to be, with one exception, the poorest held for years. The older men—it must be understood that I am speaking generally; again, there are exceptions—have exhausted not only themselves, but, apparently, all possibilities for the younger men. There are no younger men—as yet, no material from which the art of the next generation is to spring. It is no wonder that this unexpected conclusion to a hundred years of effort, of supervision, of deliberate culture, leaves the honest critic saddened and amazed; no wonder that he seeks, here, there, and everywhere, for the reason of it.

In England, the responsibility is laid upon the Academy. The complaints against it, that began with Gainsborough and were continued by Haydon, that have been officially recorded in the reports of two commissions appointed to examine into them, have strengthened with the years. The mistake might be to see in the Academy anything but a pleasant club, were it not for the power it wields: it organizes what is supposed to be the national exhibition of the year, it administers the Chantrey and other bequests, it has numerous privileges to bestow. It is natural that it should be the ambition of every British artist to belong to it and share its advantages; and, as long as this is the case, the task of reforming it and its shows will be left to the chance enthusiast or faddist. However, the scandal of its summer exhibition, now a rallying-place for the amateur from every corner of the United Kingdom, a gallery where all but the artist may apply, has be-

come so great that the Academy itself has felt obliged to grant concessions. It is proposed, in order to make the show what it should be, that henceforward the eight pictures Academicians and Associates have the right to hang on the line, shall be reduced to six; the eight the outsiders are allowed to submit, to three: which means, chiefly, that work will be lightened for the jury—this year it is reported that, crammed as the Academy is, no fewer than twelve thousand works were rejected; it means also that competition with outsiders will be stifled, that there will be more space for the oldest and most senile Academician to fill with his banalities, more chance of admission for a still greater number of amateurs and bunglers. As to the artist, is it likely that he would be more welcome in the future with three fine pictures, or statues, or drawings, than now, with the eight he does not send? It is not the Academy, even in its most generous and amiable mood, that will show the way out of the difficulty.

But if in England the active supremacy of the Academy is thought at fault, in France the root of the evil is found in the indolence of the *Académie*. Restore it to the important position it held, in reality as in name, before the Revolution, some irrepressible optimists urge, and art will revive and flourish as of old. Others go to the opposite extreme, with M. Gabriel Mourey, and believe that the less official interference there is, the better. So far from wanting to kindle new life in an old, worn-out institution, they say, do not let us have any institutions at all.

Artists whose faith is not yet shaken in the galleries blame the dealer, who buys for his profit where the patron bought for his pleasure. But I have heard the dealers say that all would once more be well with the world, if the patron or collector, who knows nothing, still relied upon him—the dealer—who knows everything; as it is, the artist can sell any trash he chooses to paint, and exhibit it into the bargain, and the tone of the exhibitions is inevitably lowered. Reinstall the dealer, and the miracle is worked: the Reign of the Ugly is at an end.

Ingenious as are these various arguments, their real interest is the proof they give of an increasing distrust in the present exhibition system. I have no particular sympathy with the extremists, the anarchists. A modern exhibition has been, and can be, as delightful in its way as the National Gallery and the Louvre are in theirs; but not if it is managed by people who are just as

willing to accept bad work as good, and quite unwilling to hang work that is better than their own. I think a clue to the evil is to be had in a fact pointed out in an essay by Mr. Naegely, the very latest of the Academy's critics. "The British School of Painting," he writes, "is represented at present in the National Gallery by the works of fifty-three deceased Masters (?). It covers a period of about two centuries and a half—from Dobson to Pickersgill. How many of these fifty-three artists have an incontestable claim to eminence?" But no one questions the possibility of the Academy's finding seventy contemporary artists, whom, by their election, it proclaims masters of painting, sculpture and engraving. The century's colossal blunder has been to believe that art and artists could be manufactured. Commercial at heart, it thought all that had to be done was to create the demand, and the supply would follow, as a matter of course; and, for a while, the army of students in the Academy and South Kensington schools, and in the studios of Paris, the countless canvases in the galleries were accepted as unanswerable proofs of this truth. Some twenty or thirty years ago, faith in the exhibitions was so complete that a picture had only to hang on the line in the Academy, or to be medalled in the *Salon*, to be considered a masterpiece. Those were the happy days when palaces went up by the dozen in the art purlieus of Kensington, and the youths of all nations rushed to Paris to try their luck in the Klondyke of art; the deplorable days when the exhibitions began to set the standard for the artist. The modern necessity of working up or down to the exhibition level has been regretted too often already, for me to insist upon it now.

But the good times could not last. The patrons of art who had made, in the Academy, those wonderful collections, like the Tate now saddled on a long-suffering nation, began to find that the masterpieces, for which they had paid thousands, would not in the open market fetch as many hundreds, and the pictures on the line ceased to sell as readily. The sensations in the *Salon* began to pall; when everyone painted big *machines* size was no distinction; and the whole medal system was so abused that it was really the cause of the split in 1889. In a word, the Exhibition Bubble burst, though it has taken some few years for artists and public alike to realize the fact. But how remain blind to it after this spring, when, just before the shows, we were promised,

as the supreme achievement of the Academy, a painting by a policeman—which, at the last moment, did not get hung; as the *clou* of the *Salons*, a picture with a frame opening by a spring, which may have enjoyed its success, for all I know! The worst of it is that, as the struggle has become harder, the artist, instead of understanding the real cause, has gone on giving more and more exhibitions; while, on the other hand, the public, puzzled, confused, convicted of ignorance, is now simply bored by the whole business. You have only to consult the press to learn how widespread is the new indifference. Only two of the London literary weeklies continue to publish a regular article on art. Popular sheets lengthen their columns of dramatic and literary notes; art notes are gradually disappearing. I noticed their absence, especially in the two short-lived Sunday ventures, both of which made every possible bid they could to popular taste. There is no doubt that the people have had enough of art. And it is at this moment of stagnation and dejection that American artists, who have heard rumors that London is rapidly replacing Paris as the world's great art centre, are coming to London in shoals! If they could but be made to realize that, if a few American artists, so few they could be counted on the fingers of one hand, have climbed to the top of the English ladder, it is only after an average, among the leading four or five, of thirty years of hard struggle and striving!

I have stated the facts. They are just now the subject of lamentation, but, I must say, I see in them more reason for rejoicing. Art need not depend on exhibitions. Take black and white work, for example. In all the galleries, except the Royal Academy—which seems to make a point of rejecting anything with the least pretence to character—it reveals more originality and life than the painting and sculpture, largely because it is entirely independent of these shows. The illustrator exhibits the drawings and prints he happens to have made; he does not make them in order to exhibit them. And so it ought to be with the painter and the sculptor. There has been too much sham, too much sentiment in the century's craze for art. When the artists who organize exhibitions, and the people who go to see them, would rather have two or three good pictures in a gallery than a thousand bad or sensational ones, the reproach of dulness will be silenced, the true millennium will have come.

E. R. PENNELL.